



THE ICON
APOCRYPHA / PSEUDEPIGRAPHA
GOD – I. DEATH

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OVERVIEW

It would be difficult to overstate the influence *GOD* has had on our culture. In fact, I like to begin my classes on ancient literature with this analogy. I tell my students to imagine the civilizations of antiquity like vast buildings soaring up from the foundations of their epic literature: Mesopotamia from its *Gilgamesh*, Greece from its *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Rome from its *Aeneid*, etc. Now consider our own past millennium—its driving ideas and passions; its oppressions and resistance movements; its developments and dissipations. Is *GOD* not likewise at the root? Or, to employ a slightly different metaphor, can one not already see in the seed of this work intimations of all the shoots and branches, flowers and weeds of 1,000 years of spiritu-intellectual history? To borrow a phrase from an ancient philosopher, surely all post-Transition thought is one long footnote to *GOD*.

Of course, such an assessment of the work's crucial position within the canon may seem at odds with its official position *outside* the canon. It remains "apocryphal" to this day—an irony for which we can thank certain accidents of history.¹ In any event (and regardless of what decisions might be made by the new Canon Communittee), certainly all parties agree that Julian's *GOD* has played a profound role in the formation of post-Transition culture. Writers and poets across the ages have drawn from its images; mystologues and philosophers tend to its questions; reactionaries and rebels alike appeal to its principles. Even the New Materialists cite its verses in their polemics against spirituality itself. It is, in short, a classic.

But this was not always the case. In fact, when the three poems (*DEATH*, *DESCENT*, & *RESURRECTION*) were first written, they languished for years in near-total obscurity. That is, until a chance discovery brought them to the eye of Professor A. Severan, a budding scholar of post-postmodern literature. The edition of Julian's work that he brought out not only provided salutary notes and explanatory glosses (an all-but-necessary addition for making *GOD*'s archaic cosmos of seraphim and crystal spheres intelligible to a modern audience), it also included a lengthy Preface situating the work in its contemporary cultural-literary context.² In *GOD*, Severan claimed to have found a pivotal specimen of the age—indeed, the very "epic of metamodernity." So would he, in a single stroke, secure for Julian both a gateway to the general reading public *and* an imprimatur of the ivory tower. The poem has not been out of print since.

Severan's hype has long been critiqued by scholars.³ Still, he was obviously justified in claiming that *GOD* stood as a direct address to the early 21st Century and its perilous ecological, political, cultural, and spiritual crises. All stemmed from a singular "crisis of Meaning," a critical pitch of post-modern, hyper-consumerist nihilism which Julian saw as the chief threat facing human flourishing (if not its continued survival). *GOD* was his attempt to find a way out, a political myth meant to chart a path beyond the abyss.

To tell it, Julian develops and expands upon an already existing myth—one of the last, one might say, with any currency in his secular times: *the death of God*. What the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had once ominously alluded to, Julian chronicles in full color,⁴ enlarging the redolent philosophical metaphor to seven whole cantos of mutiny, insurrection, and divine slaughter. We hear it all from Joel, an angel of Heaven turned

¹ More precisely, the reactionary prejudices of later spiritual authorities who, fearing the inherently subversive message of the poem, demoted its status in order to defuse it of authority. Clearly it did not take long before the revolutionary spirituality *GOD* helped unleash established its own clerical institutions that eyed their original charter warily. Its ultimate relegation to Apocrypha five centuries ago has become a topic of increasing critical attention. See, for instance, Lily Shepherd, "Blow It Up: Orthodox Mystologues and the Defusing of Julian's Bomb," *Julianic Studies* (1017).

² The period known as Postmodernism was over, but what had taken its place was not yet entirely clear. Severan was among a diverse band of young academics trying to map the new cultural landscape. See the Preface to the First Edition.

³ See, e.g., John Pond, "Inventing Culture: Severan's Preface as Opportunist Criticism," *Julianic Studies* (999); Sierra Herder-Wolf, "Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: A. Severan, Creative Criticism, and the Making of Metamodernity," *Julianic Studies* (1002).

⁴ For some critics, too much color. See Brenda Sharp, "From Nietzsche's Sublime to Julian's Ridiculous: The Unintended Bathos of God's *DEATH*," (1003).



co-conspirator, who eventually sides with the modern insurrectionists after seeing his own naïve faith literally crumble before his eyes. Reluctantly, Joel joins the revolution's leaders: scientist John Faust, and a Congolese refugee known only as 'Job.' In an epic confrontation between God and Earth, the traditional Christian deity is at last robbed of His power by the world's doubt, before falling helplessly into the abyss (not hell, *per se*, but a sort of underworld for dead and discarded ideas). Such is the story recounted in **DEATH**, the first of the three poems.

Had **GOD** ended there, it is unlikely we would still be reading it today.⁵ As just another modern monument—however reluctant—to humanity's emancipation from its mythic moorings, it would have surely been swept away during the Transition like all the rest. But **GOD** does not end there; **DEATH** was merely the exposition. With the opening of **DESCENT**, Julian begins his real work, starting with a savage critique of the shallow and destructive consumerist culture ushered in after God's demise. For Earth, suddenly realizing the terrifying new freedom it's assumed after murdering the divine, now desperately seeks some guidance and a sense of direction. It finds it in the all-too-willing Salesmen [sic], a figure who steps into the power vacuum with the tantalizing lure of euphoric-yet-destructive distractions.

Soon, a City rises from the ash heap of Heaven: endless Towers, grids of metal, and the monotonous gray sprawl. Wandering through this post-war apocalypse of "Progress"—where materialism bulldozes all concern for Nature, history, beauty or depth—Joel grows increasingly disillusioned with the revolution he himself helped usher in. At last, the miserable state of the post-Meaning world drives him to a radical idea: *what if God could be brought back?* Pushed over the brink by humanity's nihilism, Joel commits to descending into the underworld in an attempt to rescue God from the realm of the dead.

The rest of the epic is essentially the unfolding of this project: the audacious attempt to revive some sort of existential meaning and value, and the wrestling with such a revival's implications. Joel soon learns, for instance, that his initial reactionary impulse—to simply return God as He was—is, properly speaking, impossible. God is simply in too crippled a condition to survive such a journey. In a bold (and, for his time, certainly blasphemous) reversal of roles, then, Joel takes the mangled Lord upon his own back and doggedly persists on a harrowing ascent back to the stars.

RESURRECTION, the final (and by far the longest) of the three poems, sees this endeavor to its unpredictable conclusion. Having come of age during (and by means of) these cosmic struggles, Joel now grows into his own, shedding his past as a timid follower and assuming the unexpected role of a leader. Amassing a growing protest of likewise-disillusioned souls, he instigates a grassroots, raucous, horn-blowing insurrection against the consumerist regime led by the Salesmen. God, at least as Joel found Him, has failed to make it this far. In His place, though, rides a beautiful idol, symbol of the sacred, which the revolutionary troupe has made and which they now wheel into the City. There they confront its leaders and, in a climactic street battle, pent-up Sacredness finally *explodes* back into the world, re-enchanting life, and causing even the urban seas of pavement to break into blossom. A new spiritual epoch dawns; the horrors of the City are expunged; new leaders are chosen, and God—transfigured mystically as a kaleidoscopic Eye—is worshipped with pagan-like music and dance.

The death of God is not so much Julian's subject, then, as his starting place. And indeed, it is to this revolutionary (one might even say *eschatological*) final vision—of toppling materialism, and ushering in a new age of ecological regeneration and human flourishing—that we owe Julian's continued and far-reaching influence today. For we are the heirs of that tradition.

From the garden communes that sprang up as America declined (taking **RESURRECTION** as their very manifesto), to the great agricultural villages they grew into, cultivating our own culture's rich mythic heritage—to today, when the critical eye of scholarship now calls on us to reevaluate our myths and their legacy, to determine what role—if any—the sacred should continue to play in the world, **GOD** undergirds it all.

THEMES

GOD is a long work, with many themes and ideas running across its three poems. **DEATH** begins in a minor key. Opening, as it does, in a graveyard of sorts, the poem deals considerably with **loss**—loss of loved ones, of innocence, orientation and direction; loss of an older, simpler way of life, and a sense of one's place in the world. Fundamentally, **DEATH** is a poem about the loss of meaning (with a capital M), presented in terms of a 'loss of faith,' both at the personal and historical levels. As such, it is also a poem about **doubt**.

⁵ Keeping in mind that **DEATH** is sometimes regarded by critics as the least impressive of the three poems.



Obviously, the figure of Faust looms large in this regard as the virtual embodiment of modern critical attitudes toward religion based on empiricist and materialist assumptions. But Job's grievances demand equal attention as a reflection of doubt, and the old philosophical and political problems of *suffering and death* everywhere haunt the poem, and will continue to rear at pivotal moments of decision for Joel.

Still, the loss/rejection of religious moorings, though an occasion to grieve for some, can also be seen as an *emancipation* (as indeed it was during the 'Enlightenment'). To be sure, the question of existential freedom lies at the heart of the entire trilogy, as does the question about what lengths one ought go, what transgressions one might make, to attain it. The uses of *technology*, particularly as it relates to industrialization—and, more specifically, industrialized war—thus becomes a crucial issue throughout the work. *DEATH* sets these themes in motion, to be picked up and developed later on in *DESCENT* and *RESURRECTION*. (See also *Appendix 2*)

AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

GOD was written by the poet Julian between the years 2011 and 2015 CE. It is widely believed that the name "Julian" is a pseudonym, however, making the actual identity of the author unknown. According to tradition, Julian was born sometime around 1990, somewhere in New England, to a very religious Christian family. With an eye to someday becoming a professor of Christian History, he took up the study of religious anthropology in college. At the age of 19, he became engaged to a young woman. Then he lost his Christian faith, and broke off his engagement.

After traveling abroad for a time, he returned to America and moved into an artistic collective, where he began writing *DEATH*. It is said he had intended to stop there. But, the basic conventions of epic (see *FORM AND STRUCTURE*) called him down into the underworld. He began *DESCENT*, and followed them further, through Milton, Dante and, ultimately, to *GOD*. Through *DESCENT*, he gained some kind of cathartic confrontation with his religious past, which in turn propelled him to *RESURRECTION*.

After finishing *GOD*, Julian's actions are unknown. In some traditions, it is believed that he removed to some rural area of Vermont and married. (See *Corpus Julianicus* on p. xxi for more.)

FORM AND STRUCTURE

GOD is a long poem written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter. As a rule, this means that each line has 5 units called "feet," with each "foot" made up of an unstressed (v) and a stressed (/) syllable:

| v / | v / | v / | v / |. So, for instance:

v / v / v / v / v /

It is a great endeavor, all in all...

A poem composed entirely of such lines, however, would quickly grow tedious. For this reason, mature blank verse poetry conventionally makes use of certain metrical "substitutions" and other means of creating dynamic tension within the regularity of the verse. (For a complete analysis of Julian's prosody, see *Appendix 3: "On the Poetics of GOD"*.)

As for the form of the poem itself, *GOD* is an epic. This, too, has many conventions. For content, epic poems traditionally take as their subject some large or important event in the history of a people. They narrate the exploits and designs of god(s) as they help human actors achieve their ends. The main protagonist is usually a national hero of some kind—one who, after various travails of being buffeted about across vast distances and experiencing shipwreck (literally or figuratively), goes on to accomplish big things, even the founding of a future civilization.

Epics also conventionally employ certain narrative elements, such as:

- 1) the invocation of a Muse, or supernatural source of artistic inspiration,
- 2) a beginning "in the middle of things" (Latin *in medias res*), with a later recounting of past events,
- 3) scenes of council/assembly,
- 4) a war involving divinities,
- 5) a *katabasis*, or "descent" into the underworld.

GOD features these elements, as well as many allusions to/developments of the inherited epic tradition more broadly. An episodic breakdown/formal outline of the poem is presented on the following page.



Front Matter

- i. Dedication
- ii. Epigraph
- iii. Author's Preface
- iv. Pre-Addenda

BOOK I

Canto 1: Overture: A Eulogy

SYNOPSIS

Once a singer in Heaven's cathedral, the fallen angel Joel reflects on the murder of the traditional Christian God. Alone in a moonlit forest, he strums a mandolin and gazes down into the underworld, where he can see the Deity, now just a ghostly shade walking the ruins of Eternal Paradise. Despite having joined the revolution against Heaven, he has just fled in disgust from the consumerist City his party of materialist insurrectionists erected in God's absence. Joel explains that he has come to pay his respects and grieve the death of sacredness. Though song itself is now outmoded, one last time he will sing, and recount—as a kind of memorial or funeral speech—how all of this came to be.

OUTLINE

- i. Proem
- ii. Invocation
- iii. Beginning of Exposition: Joel, a fallen angel, describes his predicament
- iv. Joel narrates what he sees through the Void: God languishing in the underworld
- v. God sees something...
- vi. God cuts through the woods to see better
- vii. God looks out on the ruins of Heaven
- viii. God walks among the ruins
- ix. God stops to consider a section of the ruins: an old monument depicting his battle with the monster Behemoth
- x. The sound of distant singing interrupts God's grief...
- xi. God follows the sound, and discovers its source: fields of fallen angels, all singing the Requiem mass
- xii. God disappears to mourn in solitude
- xiii. Joel resumes his narration of matters above
- xiv. In a reluctant eulogy, Joel will relate the full story of God's death

BOOK II

Canto 2: Genesis

SYNOPSIS

Joel recounts the natural origins of the universe, the evolutionary rise of life on planet Earth, and the appearance of human beings. But humans, unlike other animals, craved principled direction and a sense of Meaning, and so created God by projecting themselves onto Nature. Such is the story, anyway, as he has heard it told by John Faust, a scientist whose popularization of critical thought causes the sacred to lose its grip on Earth's imagination. Now, at the tipping point, all that's needed is a spark to ignite the total revolution against Transcendence...

OUTLINE

- i. Before the Big Bang: the singularity
- ii. The 'Big Bang'
- iii. Recombination: the creation of light
- iv. The 'dark ages'
- v. Star formation
- vi. The evolution of life

- vii. The appearance of human beings
- viii. Humanity's invention of God
- ix. The rise of Faust
- x. Materialism, industrialization, and doubt

Canto 3: Mutiny

SYNOPSIS

It comes. World war is breaking out across the continents. Now, as Earth's armies mobilize, a midnight group secretly assembles in the Sistine Chapel to debate an uprising against God Himself. There, a Congolese refugee known only as "Job" argues for God's ouster on the grounds of His allowing—if not causing—human suffering, John Faust on the imperatives of Reason. At last, war is declared, and a Tower to Heaven is built.

OUTLINE

- i. A secret assembly meets at the Vatican
- ii. Job takes the stage
- iii. Job's speech
- iv. Faust's speech
- v. Building the Tower
- vi. Job at the ceiling
- vii. Breaking through the ceiling

BOOK III

Canto 4: Twilight of the Dawn

SYNOPSIS

The regular holy rites in Heaven's vast cathedral, presided over by the LORD Himself, are unexpectedly interrupted when the Archangel Michael announces the presence of an invading human army. At this bizarre declaration, ancient ritual is awkwardly cut short. But Joel, scared, follows after his God... He finds Him on the ramparts of the Celestial City, gazing down with His chief angels on the invaders below.

OUTLINE

- i. Meanwhile, in an unsuspecting Heaven, Joel and the other angels assemble for Communion
- ii. The dais
- iii. The arrival and enthronement of God
- iv. In retrospect, Joel wonders if God had any inclination of what was about to befall Him
- v. Joel sings the missal
- vi. A strange interruption
- vii. Joel, and the rest of Heaven, unexpectedly transported back to their rooms
- viii. Joel seeks out God

Canto 5: The Greatest War

SYNOPSIS

Responding to the invasion, God musters the entirety of His Glory in the form of the resplendent Empyrean, then sends Michael down to the invaders. But the Archangel is quickly dispatched with. Total war erupts and, seeing the vast host of angels swarm into battle against them, the armies of humanity dig trenches into the clouds—from which millions of angels are slaughtered by machinegun



fire. Finally, though, night falls, demanding a cessation from the fighting.

OUTLINE

- i. Meeting Earth's onslaught, God musters his Heavenly Hosts
- ii. God sends St. Michael to parley with the invaders
- iii. The angels attack
- iv. ...and Earth's armies respond
- v. The angels retreat
- vi. Humanity invents an imitation Empyrean: the industrial assembly line
- vii. The angels regroup
- viii. The angels' second attempt is thwarted by Earth's new weapons
- ix. Overconfident in their success, some in Earth's armies storm into No Man's Land
- x. The angels retreat again
- xi. Armistice: with the fall of darkness, both sides pause from the fighting

Book IV

Canto 6: Losing Faith

SYNOPSIS

Angel corpses strew the fields of cloud. Joel is terrified. God walks in his Heaven... Throughout the night, humanity collects their dead, as the millions of shell-shocked invaders dream up differing visions for a post-religion world. Finally, morning sees hostilities resume—with a full siege of Heaven's ancient walls, which finally fall to the industrial armies of Earth.

OUTLINE

- i. Joel is shaken by the attack on Heaven
- ii. In the camp of the invaders, tension and confusion

- iii. Faust's contingent informs him of new discoveries that will aid their war effort
- iv. Joel wakes in his room to a new light, and the sight from his window of Earth's resumed invasion
- v. The aerial attack
- vi. The pitched Battle of the Stars
- vii. Job wrestles Peniel
- viii. The bombing of Heaven
- ix. The holocaust of the Twelve Tribes
- x. Heaven's gate collapses

Canto 7: The Fall

SYNOPSIS

With Heaven collapsing around him, Joel finally renounces his childhood faith—and, reluctantly, joins the invaders. At last, the insurrectionists come to confrontation with God Himself. With their defiant disbelief, they cast Him down into the underworld as atom bombs explode, leveling the ruins of Eternity.

OUTLINE

- i. Heaven infiltrated
- ii. Joel loses faith
- iii. The Messiah arms
- iv. The Shield of Faith
- v. Farewell to Ecclesia
- vi. Christ vs. the insurrectionists
- vii. The modern crucifixion of Christ
- viii. Paradise rejected
- ix. The confrontation
- x. The demolition of Heaven
- xi. The death of God

A NOTE ON THE NOTES

1. Notes appear beside each canto in the margins. For greater ease in readability and comprehension, care has been taken to distinguish between A. Severan's original 2019 notes and my own annotations. As a general rule, the former are printed in gray "Times New Roman" font, the latter in blue "Arial": A. Severan's like this; **Professor Greenwood's** like this.
2. Notes citing a direct quotation or allusion are marked with a ° symbol.
3. Abbreviations include:
 - cf.** = "compare": directs the reader's attention to a related text
 - ff.** = "and following": after giving the first line or page number, the passage cited is relevant up to an undesignated point
4. Books of the Christian Bible cited in the annotations have the following abbreviations:

OLD TESTAMENT (OT)

Gen = Genesis ; **Ex** = Exodus ; **Lev** = Leviticus ; **Num** = Numbers ; **Deut** = Deuteronomy ; **Josh** = Joshua ; **Judg** = Judges ; **Ruth** = Ruth 1-2 **Sam** = 1-2 Samuel ; 1-2 **Kgs** = 1-2 Kings ; 1-2 **Chr** = 1-2 Chronicles ; **Ez** = Ezra ; **Neh** = Nehemiah ; **Esth** = Esther ; **Job** = Job ; **Ps/Pss** = Psalm/Psalms ; **Prov** = Proverbs ; **Eccl** = Ecclesiastes ; **Song** = Song of Songs/Solomon ; **Isa** = Isaiah ; **Jer** = Jeremiah ; **Lam** = Lamentations ; **Ezek** = Ezekiel ; **Dan** = Daniel ; **Hos** = Hosea ; **Joel** = Joel ; **Amos** = Amos ; **Obad** = Obadiah ; **Jonah** = Jonah ; **Mic** = Micah ; **Nah** = Nahum ; **Hab** = Habakkuk ; **Zeph** = Zephaniah ; **Hag** = Haggai ; **Zech** = Zechariah ; **Mal** = Malachi

NEW TESTAMENT (NT)

Matt = Matthew ; **Mark** = Mark ; **Luke** = Luke ; **John** = John ; **Acts** = Acts ; **Rom** = Romans ; 1-2 **Cor** = 1-2 Corinthians ; **Gal** = Galatians **Eph** = Ephesians ; **Phil** = Philippians ; **Col** = Colossians ; 1-2 **Thess** = 1-2 Thessalonians ; 1-2 **Tim** = 1-2 Timothy ; **Titus** = Titus ; **Phim** = Philemon ; **Heb** = Hebrews ; **Jas** = James ; 1-2 **Pet** = 1-2 Peter ; 1-2-3 **Jn** = 1-2-3 John ; **Jude** = Jude ; **Rev** = Revelation